

VZCZCXRO3048
RR RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHSK #1060/01 2711059
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 281059Z SEP 06
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5148
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1286
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 001060

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/27/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: THE HARD LIFE AND TIMES OF BELARUSIAN THINK TANKS

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Leaders of the most prominent independent analytical centers in Belarus recently detailed how a continuing campaign of repression by the Lukashenko regime has caused many of their organizations to formally disband. Despite the pressure, think tank leaders continue working to try to inform Belarusians about the true state of their country. The think tankers praised the USG's efforts to break the regime's stranglehold on public opinion by providing consistent financial support to independent analytical centers. End summary.

12. (C) On September 14, Pol/Econ Chief hosted a lunch for seven leaders of think tanks to solicit their views on the viability of such organizations under the Lukashenko regime. Participants included Oleg Manayev, Director of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies; Yaroslav Romanchuk, Director of the Mises Center; Valyantsina Trygubovich, Chairperson of Belaruskaya Perspektiva; Andrey Vardomatsky, Director of the NOVAK Market and Opinion Research Company; Vladimir Matskevich, Head of the Agency for Humanitarian Technologies; Aleksandr Potupa, President of the Belarusian Association of Entrepreneurs; and Valeriy Fadeyev, Chairman of the Law Initiative NGO. Poloff met separately with Valeriy Karbalevich of the Strategy think tank on August 24.

Gone are the (Not Really So) Good Old Days

13. (C) Manayev described the recent history of think tanks in Belarus. By 2000 there were two dozen well-established independent organizations promoting new ideas in fields as diverse as education, local governance and legal reform. The overall atmosphere was never especially favorable because the regime claimed to speak for the entire nation, calling into question the need for any independent research.

14. (C) The 2004 elections and constitutional referendum marked a turn for the worst, according to Manayev. Many think tanks became actively involved in the campaign, leading to a high-level GOB decision to rein them in. The Belarusian Idea Factory, an umbrella organization representing two-thirds of think tanks, came under scrutiny after the elections and was deregistered. (Note: A court decision in August upheld the deregistration. End note.)

15. (C) The government has employed varied means to impede think tanks. Many had their registration revoked or were not re-registered. (Note: Of those think tanks represented at the lunch, three were no longer registered and one's

registration was under suspension. End note.) Others have come under economic pressure. Karbalevich's think tank faces penalties for claimed back taxes it cannot pay. Vardomatsky complained the government instructed major clients of his polling firm to take their business elsewhere. The government is also considering measures to complicate independent research. For example, a bill on polling would destroy the possibility of conducting anonymous opinion surveys. Also, a law criminalizing spreading "misinformation" complicates the publishing of data gathered from anonymous sources.

Underground, but Not Yet Six Feet Under

16. (C) Unregistered think tanks continue their work, albeit not without constraints. Trygubovich noted work in the provinces became especially difficult when her organization failed to reregister, because state-owned enterprises are the primary employers, and residents fear that associating with independent organizations will cost them their jobs. Holding events in commercial or public venues becomes impossible sans registration, forcing groups to hold meetings in private apartments. Trygubovich further commented that the lack of a registration meant she could only work with people she already knew and trusted, lessening the opportunity to reach out to potential new partners.

17. (C) Romanchuk and Potupa offered positive assessments of the ability to collect information for their research. Potupa even believed his organization was sometimes successful in using splits within the government to defend the rights of business. Matskevich argued if think tanks ever overcame governmental interference and managed to significantly influence public opinion, the government would

MINSK 00001060 002 OF 002

resort to personal attacks, including physical assaults if necessary, on activists. Fadeyev said the government viewed as especially dangerous any signs of think tanks unifying their efforts in an association designed to spread independent ideas.

Comment: Informal Networks to Supplant Registered NGOs?

18. (C) Far from throwing in the towel, think tank representatives seem determined to carry on with their mission even if that means working as private citizens rather than the heads of legal entities. The necessity for activists to conduct research and disseminate findings as individuals rather than as NGOs will present continued challenges for our efforts to aid civil society. The think tankers praised the flexibility of the USG in providing grants to talented individuals with good ideas rather than insisting on working only with registered institutions, which are the first to collapse under GOB repression. Conversely, they noted more rigid EU guidelines often meant that too much European assistance flowed to relatively tame organizations the Lukashenko regime allowed to exist because they did not seriously challenge the status quo.

Stewart